Localized motivations for antisemitism within the Ummah

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Antisemitism marked with an irrational prejudice against Jews and Israel is on the rise over the past decade after declining for much of the post WW-II era [1].

This trend is particularly acute in Muslim-majority countries where surveys show the percentage of population with positive views of Jews languishing in the single digits [2]. Deconstructing the provenance of this neo-antisemitism is essential if we are to effectively combat it. While scholars have extensively analyzed antisemitism over the ages across myriad dimensions [3], we point out that non-theological and localized motivations explain much of the renewed expression of antisemitism across the Muslim ummah. By 'localized', we denote motivations that are isolated both along the space (viz. specific to group or country) and time (viz. specific to the past few decades) dimensions.

Since the pre-Christian era, antisemitism has been a scourge on human civilization. Its continuation into the modern era in spite of the monstrosities inflicted on Jews during WWII represents a collective failure on our part to eradicate irrational hatred from society's midst. In the post-war era, we mercifully do not see any large-scale self-identification with the "antisemite" tag. Antisemitism, though, continues to survive and has indeed adapted itself to the changing political discourse of the times. The most prominent example of such adaptation is the couching of Jew-hatred under the anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist categories since the 1967 Yom Kippur war [4].

Our principal concern in this paper is with the surge of antisemitic incidents across the Islamic world in the past decade [5].

A tragic example was proffered a few weeks back when MEMRI TV released footage showing Yemeni Zaidi worshippers repeatedly
chanting "Death to Israel" just moments before they are blown to smithereens by their sectarian rivals from the Salafi-inspired Islamic State [6].

Monumental literature already exists analyzing the provenance and persistence such irrational Jew-hatred across social, religious, economic, racial and political dimensions [7]. In this paper, we do not deny or contradict any of these theoretical frameworks. Instead, we provide a complementary argument that the recent rise in antisemitism is well-explained by political, non-theological reasons that are specific to the local elite across different countries, who in turn are motivated by peculiar circumstances of the times they find themselves in. And, it is by a clear elucidation of these temporal reasons that we hope to address the issue of antisemitism effectively.

**Reason One: Diversion of hostility by minority**

Example: Post-79 theocratic Iranian regime

Background: There is little record of Jewish oppression by Persian kingdoms in their Zoroastrian era [8]. Indeed, the earliest known documentation of human rights is attributed to Cyrus, who is also credited with repatriating Jews following their Babylonian captivity [9]. In recent times however, particularly since the 1979 revolution, Iran has led the opposition to Israel. The regime has routinely denounced the Zionist state's right to exist [10] in addition to sponsoring more antisemitic events than any other government [11].

Explanation: All this is understandable if we recognize Iran's existential fears arising from its Sunni Arab neighbors. The antipathy between the two factions is deeply rooted in history [12]. While the Shia faith's creation preserved Iranian sovereignty by preventing Persian subservience to Arab cultural values, certain features of its practice [13] preclude the possibility of immediate reconciliation between the two factions. Apart from this, the Arab states feel threatened by Iran's long dominance within the Muslim world in the fields of arts, music, literature, medicine and philosophy. These factors create and sustain a strong hostility against Iran amongst sections of the Sunni Arab elite. The Shia regime in Iran tries to dilute this antipathy while also increase its influence on the Arab street by focusing on the lowest common denominator between the two factions, viz. a vigorous opposition to Israel.

**Reason Two: Leadership of Ummah**

Example: Erdogan and AKP
Background: Relations between the Islamist AKP government in Turkey and Israel nose-dived after the ferry attack incident during the 2010 Gaza blockade [14]. The current president Recep Erdogan has repeatedly berated Israel, even comparing it to Hitler on multiple occasions [15]. Hamas leaders have addressed AKP congress with open calls for destruction of Israel [16]. Virulent antisemitic literature continues to be published with impunity [17].

Explanation: In wake of a national catharsis following the defeat of the Ottoman empire, Kemal Ataturk instituted elaborate de-Islamization reforms including changing of script away from Arabic, banning of hijab, forcible closing down of seminaries, and strict secularization of the state apparatus [18]. In recent times, AKP has steadily chipped at this secular system. After a decade of economic progress, AKP feels that the historical precedent of Turkey hosting the Sunni Khalifa points at its manifest destiny to again become the leader of the ummah [19]. Towards that end, it has found it profitable to raise issues popular on the Arab street, paramount of which is staunch opposition to Israel. At a time, when other Arab monarchies have found it difficult to maintain an open antisemitic stance in wake of their dependence on western support, AKP has found it expedient to repeatedly rake up opposition to Israel and consolidate Sunni support in its favor.

Reason Three: Territorial conflict

Example: Hamas and Fatah

Background: Hamas directly calls for destruction of Israel with its charter making claims inspired from the discredited "The protocol of the elders of Zion" [20]. But even the supposedly moderate Fatah party harbors dangerously antisemitic views. Fatah’s current leader Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) insinuated in his PhD thesis that Holocaust was a Zionist-Nazi plot to expand Jewish influence [21]. Rampant antisemitism across a wide swathe of the Palestinian population has been recorded by observers [22].

Explanation: Since the 1948 exodus, the Arab population has nursed the loss of territorial control. This feeling - accentuated by lack of assimilation of Palestinian refugees into neighboring Arab states - has engendered a deep antisemitic emotion within the Palestinian population. The continuing suffering from the long-standing conflict has created an unfortunately fertile ground for irrational Jew-hatred to grow.

Reason Four: Emphasize separation from kuffar and blame foreign hand for domestic failures

Example: Urdu press in Pakistan

Background: Yahoodi conspiracy theories have been a staple of the Urdu press for generations now [23]. From earthquakes to floods to even mundane issues like electricity shortage are linked to conspiracies involving "yahood aur hanud". The army position has been anti-Israel, though not necessarily pro-Palestinian either - with the prominent example being of (then Brigadier, later General) Zia-ul Haq bombing
Palestinians at the behest of the Hashemite rulers during the Black September events of 1970 [24]. Antisemitic attitudes in society came to fore through media reports when the popular cricketer (and now conservative politician) Imran Khan married a British heiress with Jewish ancestry [25]. The execution of journalist Daniel Pearl for his Jewish heritage [26] and singling out of a synagogue during the cross-border attack on Mumbai in 2008 [27] also drew attention to wide-spread antisemitism in Pakistan.

Explanation: In the early part of the 20th century, the Muslim elite in Northern India feared a loss of influence in a post-British democratic India where the Hindus would be in a numerical majority. Using the cry of "Islam in danger", they motivated the Muslim masses and succeeded in seceding from India to form Pakistan. Following the form of Pakistan, its elite has tried to create a Pakistani identity as separate from the Indian one - not only for keeping the country united, but also to prevent any possible relapse into an "Akhand Bharat" [28]. In addition to Arabicizing both language and religion, another potent factor emphasizing the difference between pagan India and Muslim Pakistan is the staunch anti-Jewish stance that Pakistan adopts. This differentiates it from its kafir neighbor and emphasizes its own identity as the ummah's only nuclear power. The accusation of a foreign hand also allows for diversion of responsibility for domestic failures from narrow-sighted power politics of the local elite to a supposedly grand confrontation with a powerful global opponent.

Reason Five: Belonging to Ummah

Example: Mahathir affair

Background: Latent antisemitic sentiment has been noted in Malaysia and Indonesia despite these two countries not having any Jewish presence in their lands historically. Speaking at the OIC conference in 2003, Mahathir Mohammed - prime minister of Malaysia for 23 years - accused Jews of ruling the world by proxy. The event caused controversy for the seemingly approving response to Mahathir's speech from some of the attendee world leaders [29].

Explanation: Malaysia is geographically isolated from rest of the Muslim world. Its people – along with other Southeast Asian Muslims – have been treated as second-class citizens in Gulf countries. Further, since Islam spread relatively peacefully in these lands, cultural practices from pre-Muslim periods have continued into modern times, causing an identity crisis in the youth. A desire to belong to and be accepted as part of the ummah proper incentivizes countries on the periphery of the ummah to adopt radical anti-Jewish positions.

Reason Six: Construction of national identity

Example: Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh

Background: Separated geographically from the Muslim mainstream by India and lacking an indigenous Jewish presence, Bangladesh has substantial less antisemitism than the Gulf nations. Further, it was an Indian Jew by the name of Lt Gen JFR Jacob who played a decisive
role in liberating the nation in 1971 and stopping the razakar-led genocide [30]. Yet, media articles and speeches on Israel are uniformly negative with the word "Zionist" almost always used in a pejorative sense.

Explanation: In 1947, the land that is now Bangladesh separated from India based on its Islamic identity. In 1971, it split again from Muslim-majority Pakistan on basis of its linguistic identity. Following these two splits for two different reasons, there has remained a conflict in the mental construction of the Bangladeshi national identity – i.e. should it be based on the Bengali language (in which case, the state should be secular and treat all citizens equally irrespective of their religious practice) or should it be based on Islam and the Shariah law? The insinuation of Jewish torture of Palestinians serves as a recruiting cause of the Islamist initiative by getting the populace involved in transnational issues of significance to the Muslim ummah; thereby strengthening their project of establishing a distinct Bangladeshi identity separate from a general secular Bengali one [31].

Reason Seven: Consolidation of political control by positing external enemy

Example: House of Saud, Saddam regime, Gaddafi regime

Background: At one end of the spectrum, the Baathist regimes in Iraq and Libya - led by Arab nationalists Saddam Hussein [32] and Muammar Gaddafi [33] - were secular in character, and yet routinely demonized Israel in their pronouncements. At the other end, the house of Saud – partnering with the ultra-conservative Wahabi establishment – allows for virulent antisemitic propaganda to be promoted and preached through both its mass media and educational system [34].

Explanation: In all these three cases, the rulers exercised tenuous control over their territories. Gaddafi had to navigate a minefield of tribal loyalties in addition to facing western sanctions. Saddam had to fight the impression of Sunni control over a Shia-majority state while battling both Iran and the west at different points during his reign. The house of Saud even after controlling much of the Arabian Peninsula continues to remain concerned about both the loyalty of its 15% Shia population and its dependence on the Wahabi leadership for political control. In all three cases above, positing the Jewish state as a common enemy at war with the entire nation has allowed for consolidation of people's loyalty behind the state apparatus. It also buttressed the rulers' Islamic credentials and shielded them from criticism from more conservative elements in their respective societies.

In summary, we note that while extensive material exists explaining to a lay person both the roots of antisemitism [35] and approaches to tackle it [36], understanding the political reasons for the neo-antisemitism will go a long way in combating and limiting its prevalence.

References:
1. We use the alternate spelling “antisemitism” instead of “anti-Semitism” because the latter usage implies that the word “Semitism” has a valid meaning in this context. That is not true for two reasons. One, not all Jews speak a Semitic language. Two, Semitic people includes Arabs in addition to the Jews of Israel. In January, 2015, the United Nations held its first-ever meeting on the rise of antisemitic attacks worldwide. See http://www.newsweek.com/anti-jewish-violence-rise-europe-un-hears-301415 [1].


11. Results of an antisemitic cartoon competition are at http://irancartoon.com/120/holocaust/index.htm [14].


13. The practice of Tabarra at http://ismaili.net/heritage/node/12522 [16]. Ritual denouncement of certain Sahaba is greatly resented by the Sunni population.


22. Antisemitism in Palestine is well-recorded at https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/source/anti-semitism/palantoc.html [26].


32. Article on Saddam Hussein’s antipathy towards Israel is at http://www.timesofisrael.com/saddam-gave-orders-to-fire-chemical-weapons-at-tel-aviv-if-he-was-topped-in-first-gulf-war/ [36].


34. Antisemitism in Saudi media is covered in http://archive.adl.org/anti_semitism/arab/saudi_as_print.html [38].


36. Anti-Defamation League published 90 ways in which antisemitism can be countered at http://archive.adl.org/anti_semitism/new_threat/90ways.pdf [40].

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